

CHAPTER II

THE CONTINENTAL REFORMERS

LORD ACTON, in an unforgettable passage in his *Inaugural Lecture on the Study of History*, has said that "after many ages persuaded of the headlong decline and impending dissolution of society, and governed by usage and the will of masters who were in their graves, the sixteenth century went forth armed for untried experience, and ready to watch with hopefulness a prospect of incalculable change."* His reference was to the new world revealed by learning, by science, and by discovery. But his words offer an appropriate text for a discussion of the change in the conception of the relations between religion and secular interests which took place in the same period. Its inevitable consequence was the emergence, after a prolonged moral and intellectual conflict, of new conceptions of social expediency and of new lines of economic thought.

The strands in this movement were complex, and the formula which associates the Reformation with the rise of economic individualism is no complete explanation. Systems prepare their own overthrow by a preliminary process of petrification. The traditional social philosophy was static, in the sense

that it assumed
a body of class relations sharply defined
by custom
and law, and little affected by the ebb and
flow of
economic movements. Its weakness in
the face of
novel forces was as obvious as the strain
put upon it
by the revolt against the source of
ecclesiastical juris-
prudence, the partial discredit of the canon
law and of
ecclesiastical discipline, and the rise of a
political science
equipped from the arsenals of antiquity.
But it is not
to underestimate the effect of the
Reformation to say